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19

The Clipper Visits Ruth Delano

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Ruth Delano

It's the closest we come to peerage in New England. We balance the egalitarian town meeting with the Daughters, the Descendants, and the Kindred of....

At a time when most Americans barely know of their great-grandparents, a copy of the family tree with roots extending into the Middle Ages gives rock-solid meaning to who we are. It also lends a certain perspective.

If you can trace your family back to 1139 A.D. and find a few knights and dukes along the main trunk, if you are 8 generations from Capt. Myles, John and Priscilla, then you can dismiss that upstart Franklin Delano Roosevelt as "just another cousin." Ruth Edson Delano, who will celebrate her 94th birthday anniversary this spring, did just that. She was not being unkind, but when you've lived nearly a century, you aren't easily impressed.

Except for a slight hearing loss, this small woman appeared as vital and lively as someone 30 years younger. She recalls details of her youth clearly and

studies at Bridgewater Normal (State College), graduating in 1912. Of the 8 Delano children, 7 attended college. Leavitt apprenticed himself to a blacksmith, 3 of the girls became teachers, her brother Ray, companion of the swamp escapades, became a construction engineer and helped lay out many of Duxbury's roads. Two other brothers became veterinarians and were animal inspectors when Duxbury was predominantly farm land.

Her mother, the only one in the family to ride horseback for pleasure, played the organ beautifully and was president of the local Women's Temperance Union, Ruth said.

The Delano oxen, besides pulling stumps and plows, helped build 2 of Duxbury's landmarks. Ruth's father and brother provided the lumber for the Powder Point Bridge. They cut the trees in Pembroke and the oxen hauled enough to the beach to span the inlet. The oxen also pulled the casting of Myles Standish's head up to a reunion with the body, already in place.

A family member claimed that the Delanos are one of the oldest families in Duxbury -- possibly in New England. She described the clan as being close to the land, people who loved the town and stayed close to it. A Delano was chairman of the conservation committee; another served on the town forest committee. Most of the generations that stretch back to the Pilgrims were farmers.

Historical records trace the Delanos of Duxbury to Arnulph de Franchimont, who was born in 1139 A.D. Included in the family tree are Agnes, daughter of the Duke of Bavaria, and Mahieune de Lanney, heiress of the Lenneys and a descendant of a knight who lived in 1096 A.D. This was only 30 years after William, Duke of Normandy, invaded what we now call England. The product of the deFranchimont and deLanney marriage, Hugues, took his mother's name but kept the French Franchimont Coat of Arms. Along the generations the family includes the governor and captain general of Hainault in Flanders, who married the daughter of the seigneur de Burbaneon. The name is referred to as "de Lanney," "de La Noye," and "Lannoi." The family was Roman Catholic and when the heir Gysbert (Gilbert) became a Huguenot, a French Protestant, he was disinherited.

His son, Jean de Lanney, born in 1570, died when he was 34 leaving a widow, Marie, who remarried a year later. She and her new husband, Jean Pesyn (Pessin) helped the English Separatists, among them the Plymouth Pilgrims. Some of them lived in the "hospice" built by Marie and Jean. The family

inherited from his ancestors. He called it the collective unconscious. To see Ruth revisiting the house the house where she was born (presently occupied by the Martin Delanos), is to be amazed by her perfect memory. She remembers the burning room off the kitchen, the hiding spaces behind the fireplaces where she and her brothers played, the passage ways that have since been boarded up.

She is the living link to who we once were.

with a mischievous sense of humor. Dressed in a turquoise pantsuit which highlighted her snow-white hair, she was obviously amused at being interviewed.

She remembered attending the Crooked Lane School. There were 3 girls and 17 boys in the one-room school, she said. "The boys played baseball and football. The other 2 girls, Marion Chandler and Edith Whiting, sat around and talked. They didn't do much of anything. The girls were what I call sissies. They didn't go outside." Ruth realized that the boys had more fun and she joined their games or played tag as wildly as they did. "I did most everything the boys did." She won't admit to hitting a ball as well as they did. But they wouldn't have let her play if she couldn't keep up.

She had a childhood of unsupervised play and farm chores. "Ray and I were the last 2 (family records show another child who lived only one day). We roamed around, went down to the swamp and climbed the tall trees." The children were expected to help with haying and Ruth remembers spring sowing without any sense of romanticism. No Millet's giants sowing seeds against a golden sky. No "back to nature" morality. It was the regular work that kept the family fed. Ruth said the garden supplied the family with enough vegetables to last the winter. The family's oxen were harnessed to plow the hay and wheat fields. Barnyard animals provided eggs, milk and pork. Most of the work was done by Ruth's parents and their 8 children, but at the peak of the season local people were employed to help out. Ruth remembered her father getting up early while the rest of the house was asleep to chop the wood that fed the huge fireplaces each day. Once the fire was going, Ruth got out of bed. She recalled making jams and jellies in huge batches. "We raised about everything we ate," she said, "bought only sugar and molasses."

The girls in the family were taught to sew but Ruth said, "I didn't like the result after I made it." However, she does share the family's enjoyment of music. "We had an organ and when I was 10, I started taking lessons. All the girls played the organ. The boys wouldn't be seen near it." Later on, her father bought a piano for the house and Ruth gave music lessons. She soon stopped because "I didn't think there was much to that." She still has the organ in her home on Enterprise St. She lives in the old Sprague barn which one of her brothers converted.

Although oxen did the heavy farm work, the Delanos maintained horses for lighter field work. Ruth said she "didn't ride a horse except to cultivate. But my mother rode." It is apparent that the oxen weren't family pets. "Our family sold oxen to people who had more money than brains."

Although she claimed that she studied little at Partridge Academy, she was accepted at Boston University. After a year in Boston she returned to teach at the Crooked Lane School, which had not grown beyond its one room. A year later she resumed her

history speculates that this acquaintance with the Pilgrims led the boy who Marie bore to Jean de Lanney just 2 years before his death, to join the Plymouth company. He was 18 when he came to Plymouth, beginning the American (Delano) line.

This boy, Philippe, was baptized in the Walloon church. As if to further substantiate the worthiness of the line, the family history states, "The Lannoys were never a French family, being of pure Norman and Flemish blood -- much superior to the English, French and German civilization during the later middle ages (900 A.D. to 1453)." Having satisfied himself that Philippe was "the right sort," the historian speculates that he was a passenger on the Speedwell, which had to turn back as unseaworthy. The records more firmly place him on the "Fortune," which left Leiden in 1621. Philippe was the first Huguenot to establish a line in the New World. The other Huguenot in that first colony was William Molines, but he left no heirs.

Within 3 years of arriving in Plymouth, he relinquished his acre and moved north to Duxbury. His new 40-acre grant was north-northwest of John Alden's on the north side of Stony or Hill Brook. Later in 1637, the boundaries were confirmed: Alden's land on the south, the sea on the east, Bumpass to the west, the marsh to the north. It is estimated that the easterly boundary was near Lovers Lane. Although the location of his home is unknown, several old cellars were uncovered. The high school sits on part of the original grant. Philippe (Philip) apparently was much respected and "was one of the grand inquest of the colony." He also surveyed the expanding boundaries of the settlers.

When a grant of land in what is now known as Bridgewater was made in 1645, Philip Delano (note Anglicized spelling) was among those receiving land holdings. He and his first wife, Hester Dewsbury, had 8 children, thus assuring the continuation of his name. When Philip died at 79, he left a considerable estate in Duxbury and Bridgewater. Ruth is a descendant of Samuel, the sixth of Philip's 8 children. Samuel married Elizabeth Standish, daughter of Alexander Standish (son of Myles) and Sally Alden. From Samuel to Ruth is only 6 generations. Among her forebears was Jesse Delano, who served in the Revolutionary War and lived to be 80. In addition to the Standish and Alden families, the Delanos are related to the Soules (who came over on the Mayflower), Bournes and Westons.

Ruth Delano, who counts the leading Pilgrims as her ancestors -- who precisely recalled the day Peregrine White came up from Providence and took her for her first thrilling automobile ride -- who helped her mother write speeches damning alcohol ("We didn't have any alcoholic liquor in our house.") -- who saw us move into the technological age, is a living archive. She has endured nearly a century with the same stamina and humor that must have preserved the Pilgrims. She all but confirms Carl Jung's hypothesis that a person's disposition is